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Ecology, Education and the Real World

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The Triumph of Capitalism?

A Chinese proverb says: "I curse you to live in the times of change." Which is sometimes translated as: "I curse you to live in interesting times." In such interesting times we are living at present. Big changes and realignments have been taking place in front of our eyes. The spectre of Communism seems to be no longer haunting the Capitalist world. On the contrary, in the battle between Communism and Capitalism, over its social superiority, Capitalism has handsomely won.

The distinguished economist and social thinker, Robert Heilbroner, recently published an article on this very subject. The piece is provocatively titled: "The Triumph of Capitalism," and it opens with these words:

Less than seventy-five years after it officially began, the contest between capitalism and socialism is over: capitalism has won. The Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe have given us the clearest possible proof that capitalism organizes the material affairs of humankind more satisfactorily than socialism: that however inequitably or irresponsibly the marketplace may distribute goods, it does so better than the queues of a planned economy; however mindless the culture of commercialism, it is more attractive than state moralism; and however deceptive the ideology of a business civilization, it is more believable than that of a socialist one..1.

Yet, Heilbroner is aware that not all is well. He thus asks a significant question: "Is capitalism working well enough?" Once we have asked this question, we confront a very serious problem indeed.

Our first response is an automatic one: yes, of course, it is working well enough - look at the material prosperity in the West and how capitalism outperforms communism. This is one kind of answer. But actually a rather obvious answer, if not a trivial one. This answer relates to the bottom line economics. Our bottom line shows profit. So, all is well.

The economics of the bottom line has been so impressive to some that they began to mystify it. The result is economism, a philosophical doctrine which claims (implicitly or explicitly) that economics - the bottom line economics, that is - determines the structure and the ethos of society and should be unconditionally obeyed for it is our god. This last conclusion is not spelled out so clearly but it is nevertheless implied.

Now I will attempt to argue that this whole line of thinking and the entire philosophy underlying economism is basically wrong. Let us return to our question: Is capitalism working well enough? My answer is that it isn't. The bottom line economics is a misconceived idea. When we observe how life actually works, then we realize that the genuine bottom line is the quality of life. Unless an economic or a social system meets this ultimate criterion, that of the quality of life, it is an incomplete, inadequate, if not fraudulent one. In this sense economism, or the bottom line economics, may be considered fraudulent. Let me explain why.

The distinguished British writer Anthony Burgess writes: "Turning humanity into something far less than it could be is what vulgarity is about."² That is precisely what economism is attempting to do to us: it tries to reduce us to something less than what we could become. In this sense economism is pushing us on the road to vulgarity, and is itself an instrument of vulgarity. Advertising and the ideology of consumerism are its allies. When one looks perceptively at the cluster of those forces that spiritually diminish the human society, one realizes that consumerism and advertising are only tools of economism.

Thus on the first level of analysis economism must be questioned and opposed because it impoverishes us as individual existential beings, it cheapens us with regard to what we can become, it robs us of our spiritual heritage.

On the second level of analysis, economism must be questioned and opposed on ecological grounds. Economism is based on false accounting. The much celebrated bottom line is really fictitious. What it shows is often illusory profit. Why illusory? Because some parameters and costs are hidden and omitted. Those are called 'externalities', which economic models hide. These externalities show up as enormous bills - going into billions of dollars - for cleaning polluted environments and for repairing our damaged health. What will be the final bill for repairing nature and bringing it back to the state of its well-being (which means true sustainability in the long run) - nobody knows. But this kind of figure would be astronomical - a legacy of the bottom line.

An economic or a philosophical system which is so careless about the quality of life that sanctifies ecological devastations must be in some sense fraudulent. Economism claims to be the best economic system for humanity. But it simply does not deliver - if you take into account its fall out.

It must be emphasized that the ecological factor is not one of those externalities with only a nuisance value which one can easily shrug off. The ecological parameters are now of such a crucial importance to our survival that an economic system which is sane and accountable in the long run must include these parameters as integral parts of all economic equations.

This is increasingly perceived not only by the environmentalists and people of the liberal persuasion (and all those who care about the integrity of the Planet) but also by the people on the right, the traditional defenders of capitalism. One of them is Martin Anderson, of Hoover Institute in California. Anderson has proposed the idea that a clean environment should be considered a 'property right'. He has argued that a clean environment should be regarded as a 'property right,' which belongs to everybody. And therefore corporations and individuals who pollute water and air and the earth should be treated as common criminals..³

He wrote in *Christian Science Monitor*: "The only way to eliminate serious pollution is to treat it exactly for what it is: garbage.... Just as one does not have the right to drop a bag of garbage on his neighbor's lawn, so one does not have the right to drop a bag of garbage in the air or the water or the earth if it in any way violates the property right of others. What we need are tougher, cleaner environmental laws that are enforced with economic incentives and with jail terms."⁴

One does not expect this kind of language from the people on the right. But times are changing. Anderson's statement directly challenges the whole philosophy of economism, and of course bottom line economics. Thus on the second level of analysis, economism is challenged on economic grounds, as based on false accounting unrealistic in the long run. Deep down we all know that this accounting is unrealistic and yet we have been intimidated to challenge it directly.

On the third level of analysis, economism is to be questioned because it is based on a wrong ethics. The ethics of selfishness, of competition, of ruthless disregard for all beings - in the pursuit of material profit now, is unnatural from the standpoint of human history and human ethics, as well as from the standpoint of evolution. Evolution is a hymn to symbiosis. Human societies are monuments to cooperativeness and solidarity. The ethics of unbridled selfishness, which economism promotes, is not a great new invention to be welcomed - but an aberration, and an insult to our noble ethical heritage.

Let us also notice that the ethics of competitiveness contains in itself potential violence. The ethics which encourages you to tread on the bodies of others cannot be right as a human ethics. The ethical imperative of economism, expressed in the simplest way, would read as follows: Tread on the bodies of others or hang yourself if you are not successful.

On the fourth level of analysis, economism must be questioned because it is based on a myopic concept of reality. Any sensitive person, who has experienced the richness and the versatility of reality, including its magical aspects will perceive the reduction of all reality to its economic substratum as a farce, not a true rendition of the real world. What economism does is an extreme form of reductionism - reducing the world and human beings to economic categories and commodities. This represents a further vulgarization of the world, this time on the ontological level.

Now we have an answer why the economics of the bottom line is a fiction - not the ultimate criterion for accounting of all there is, and why economism is such a profoundly unsatisfactory philosophy, if not a fraudulent one. In so far as the economics of the bottom line is so crucial to present capitalism, we have an answer why capitalism does not work well enough - because it lives on the capital which belongs to future generations; because it undermines the foundations on which it rests: nature and natural cycles; because it reduces the human being, a noble animal, to a vulgar consumer.

II. Education for the Real World

Thus we come to education. In one of the most memorable scenes in *Hamlet*, the king asks: "Now Hamlet, where's Polonius?" "At supper," Hamlet responds. The king: "At supper? Where?" Hamlet: "Not where he eats, but where he is eaten."

Mutatis mutandis this could be said about present students: they are devoured by the present system of education, not nourished by it. They are not educated in the true sense of the term (*educare* - I lead), but manipulated.

Plato says: "The direction in which education sets a man will determine his future life." This is as true now as it was in Plato's times. What kind of direction is our present education setting for our young people? How are they being guided and led? To what ends and to what purposes? Are they not per chance so socialized and programmed as to be good consumers and work for the glory of the consumerist ideology and the bottom line economics?

Education as a social and civilizational enterprise must ultimately serve the quality of life. If education ignores or neglects this vital criterion, it is not an adequate education and may indeed be a misguided one.

While examining the shortcomings of economism as a universal philosophy, I have argued that it is crippled on four grounds. Its conception of reality is myopic; its values are one-sided and distorted; its accounting is grotesquely inadequate and distorted; its concept of life is vulgar. By spelling out these shortcomings (of economism) we now have a clear direction concerning desirable and worthwhile education. Let me therefore

enumerate the qualities of education worthy of the new global citizen who is going to inherit the 21st century.

1. Education should spell out a right concept of reality. The real world is not boardrooms of economists in which they play their economic games. The beauty and majesty of the cosmos far exceeds all economic models and all scientific models. Genuine education must be the process of opening up the doors and windows of the student's mind to the richness and multifariousness of the universe, not the process of reducing the universe to economic categories, or at best to physical and chemical ones. We are not isolated monads drifting aimlessly through the cosmos. We are connected with all human beings and with all living beings in one stupendous tapestry of evolution. To think well is to open one's eyes to the glory of creation in its process of becoming. This glory of becoming, from the original Big Bang, via all creative evolution, is a hymn sung to solidarity, cooperation, participation. This is what genuine education should instil in the student - the appreciation for the immense richness of the universe, and a gratitude for being in it.

2. Truly human and humane education should pursue and instil in the student right cooperative values. We know that traditional religious values have collapsed. With the collapse of religious values, all absolutist systems of values have been undermined. One of the consequences has been the rise and spread of relativism. Another consequence has been nihilism. And the two phenomena are connected. We have created a value vacuum. Hedonism, relativism and nihilism have crept in to fill this vacuum. This is not the first time in history that such a thing happened.

Let us notice something special and peculiar about our times, namely the tacit alliance between consumerism and relativism. Our first impression would be that the two phenomena are not connected. But deeper down, they are. Consumerism thrives on relativism and indirectly supports it. The reason is simple: the more perplexed and confused the consumer, the easier it is to persuade him/her to buy. But there are deeper reasons too. If you believe in some intrinsic values, which enshrine spiritual aspects of human existence, then you are not going to be easily persuaded that consumption equals redemption.

In a nutshell, spirituality is an enemy of consumerism. For this reason consumerism supports relativism ("anything goes") rather than any intrinsic system of values.

For this reason also consumerism opposes (if only indirectly) the advent of ecological values, for if nothing else, ecological values strongly advocate the curbing of our consumptive habits. It should be clear from our earlier analysis that ecological values or ecological ethics should be viewed as one of the highest priorities of humanity at this juncture of history. We need to heal the earth, we need to heal ourselves, and there is nothing relativistic about that. Saving the Planet is a social project. Ecological values are going to be the engines of this project. In the process we shall need to articulate a new set of economic values which will bond us together in the pursuit of a viable and worthwhile future.

Ecological values are not absolute, and are not meant to be. But they are not subjective - thus representing personal predilections of some individuals. They are a historical necessity for our times for the culture to survive as a human and spiritual culture. In this sense, ecological values are inter-subjective or trans-subjective. Among the most important ecological values I would mention first of all reverence for life; then responsibility for all, including future generations; then frugality in our life styles, frugality not as an imposed poverty of abnegation but as grace without waste; in economics terms this means doing more with less..5.

3(r) Right education should teach us a right system of accounting vis-a-vis nature, vis-a-

vis cultures and vis-a-vis future generations. Too often we make (or at least some of us do) handsome profit at the expense of the well-being of nature, or at the expense of the third world nations (to whom we export our pollution while we extricate from them their natural resources), or at the expense of future generations to whom we shall leave a much more impoverished and scarred planet. A right system of accounting is an economic problem, but much more so a cultural and a value problem. Our analysis of the concept of reality and of ecological values clearly points out how we should go about creating a right system of accounting.

4. A right or adequate system of education should unveil to the student an appropriate conception of human life. Human life should be one of celebration. The universe is a stupendous spectacle to contemplate and to celebrate. Its drama of becoming is second to none. To be aware that one is part of this drama is a cause for wonder and celebration. We do not deny that hardships and miseries do exist in life. Yet to be able to perceive the grandeur of the universe is to alleviate and diminish our miseries. Seeing the purpose of human life as part of the grandeur of the universe, in transcendental terms, makes our suffering more bearable. The human condition is battered but glorious. This is what the right education should instil in the student.

Ultimately all systems of education, as well as systems of philosophy are about how to be human, not how to be a consumer. We must not misread our mandate: we are here to lead our young to be deservedly human and not to manipulate them for the sake of the status quo, which anyway is undermining its own existence.

It is quite clear that we are now opening a new chapter of history. This is an ecological chapter. Our responsibility entails and necessitates ecological responsibilities. We cannot be human, in a deeper sense, unless we make peace with nature (and with ourselves, for while waging the war against nature, we have been waging one against ourselves). Thus an ecological dimension must be a part of our education, our philosophies, and of our religions..6.

III. Summary

It can be said that the West has won the battle against communism. But winning this battle - is it a victory? Or perhaps a pyrrhic victory? Entranced and mesmerized by this battle, we have perhaps neglected to see that we have been losing another, a more important battle - the battle to save the earth and also to save the meaning of our lives.

The ecological reconstruction, the healing of the earth should be now among our most important imperatives. Education, if it is genuine and comprehensive, should help this process of healing and integration. We should steep the minds of our youth in the great, everlasting liturgy of nature and teach them reverence for life and for all creation. This is an imperative of our economic survival in the long run as well as an imperative of our psychological sanity.

Ecology is about a new shape of life. Ecology is about the dignity of life. Ecology is about the dignity of human work. Present economics is suicideconomics, not a proper accounting of our household. We have been incurring an enormous debt to nature, and asking future generations to foot the bill. Future generations are refusing to do so. Future generations speak with the voice of eco-wisdom and eco-values.

We were not brought to this world to lead an alienated, estranged, separatà and uprooted existence. We were brought to this world to celebrate the glories of the Cosmos and to live in solidarity with other beings. Genuine and significant education must be one which helps to live life fully, meaningfully, inspiringly and with a modicum of grace.

Education for the real world is one which respects the world in all its dimensions, in all its richness, including its hidden and mysterious aspects. Such an education respects evolution in its profound unfolding as it builds ever more subtle structures and beings, ultimately the ones which reach out to heaven.

Let us take the human condition seriously. Let us take our predicament seriously. And let us design educational and social structures which are congruent with the evolutionary imperative, with the desiderata of life unfolding, bountiful and ultimately radiant.

To win an ideological battle while losing the environment and the quality of life is no victory. Let us clearly see what our aims and goals are - in education and culture at large. These goals have to do with the liberation and fulfilment of the human being on the highest level of cultural and spiritual attainment.

We need the courage, determination and vision to put one-dimensional theories of humans - whether of capitalist or communist variety - where they belong, on the shelf of history, and to start evolving ideals, theories and practices in the image of the human as a transcendental being.

Notes

1. Robert Heilbroner, "The Triumph of Capitalism," *The New Yorker*, January 23, 1989, p. 98.
2. Anthony Burgess, "Voyage to Discovery in the New Vulgaria," *The Observer*, 6 August, 1989.
3. As reported in the *International Herald Tribune*, April 11, 1986, p. 6.
4. Ibid.
5. For further discussion of ecological ethics see my papers, especially "Eco-ethics as the Foundation of Conservation," *The Environmentalist*, vol. 4 (1984) Supplement 7, and "Reverence for Life," in *Ethics of Environment and Development*, Donald and Joan Engel, eds., 1990.
6. For further discussion see H. Skolimowski, *Eco-philosophy, Designing New Tactics for Living*, 1981; and *Eco-theology, Toward a Religion for our Times*, 1985.